

# alexis de tocqueville's concept of political parties

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At all times education helps men to defend their independence, but this is especially so in ages of democracy. When all men are alike, it is easy to establish a single, all-powerful government; mere instinct will do that. But a great deal of intelligence, knowledge, and skill are required in these circumstances to organize and maintain secondary powers and to create, among independent but individually weak citizens, free associations which can resist tyranny without destroying public order.<sup>1</sup>

Still today nearly a century and a half after its publication *Democracy in America* remains the single most important statement about American society and, perhaps, democratic society in general. The *Democracy*, however, is not without criticism. There are, it seems, a number of defects in the work.<sup>2</sup> Take the subject of political parties. At the time of the publication of the *Democracy* (Vol. I, 1835; Vol. II, 1840), important features of the American party system were emerging as part of the political structure.<sup>3</sup> And since the *Democracy* has proved to be a valuable source on so many other aspects of American society, it is only natural that scholars would turn to it in hope of finding a description of these features. This hope, moreover, is strengthened by the fact that we know Tocqueville questioned leading political figures in every state he visited on the nature of American politics. For example, in Albany, which, with Baltimore, was one of the first cities to exhibit clearly two-party competition, he had the opportunity to meet several members of the so-called Albany Regency, that well-known group of party politicians who, since the early 1820's, had operated on the assumption that the public benefited from party

competition. Here we expect him to come away with a wealth of information which would later reappear in the *Democracy* to illustrate the force and activity of political organizations. But when we turn to the *Democracy* we are disappointed; we find nothing of the sort. As a result, scholarly opinion has concluded that Tocqueville missed the important features of parties and the party system in the United States. The most significant charges can be summarized as follows: (1) he did not understand that the election of 1800 established loyal opposition (and thus a party system) as legitimate;<sup>4</sup> (2) he included only scattered, incidental references on the function and activities of American parties (e.g., the method of choosing candidates and running elections, the relation of the party to the formal organs of government or the use of patronage and spoils as a device of party discipline and reward);<sup>5</sup> and (3) he confused interest groups trying to pressure the government on matters of public policy, such as those groups that opposed the tariff acts of 1828 and 1832, with parties competing to gain the power of government.<sup>6</sup> In neglecting these subjects, among other, Tocqueville's analysis of parties is said to be of limited value. One contemporary historian of this era, Richard Hofstadter, asserts this position unequivocally: "Tocqueville, who so seldom disappoints, is not rewarding on the subject of party."<sup>7</sup>

True enough, Tocqueville failed to mention many details on the emerging structure and activity of American parties.<sup>8</sup> These descriptive omissions, however, do not warrant the conclusion that the analysis of party is a striking defect of the *Democracy*. A completely opposite conclusion must be drawn if the book is read as a theoretical rather than descriptive source.

Tocqueville's originality is seen when we recall the institutional and intellectual status of parties at the time of his journey to America. In France, and in other European countries with parliamentary government, there were political parties. But these parties did not possess the characteristics we today attribute to political parties.<sup>9</sup> They were, strictly speaking, parliamentary groups or cliques organized by members of the legislature to influence the formation and execution of governmental policy. While a certain degree of internal organization existed in these groups it was limited to consultation on parliamentary tactics and policy. Extragovernmental party organization (to organize voters and to communicate demands to the center of governmental power) was still a thing of the future—first emerging in Europe in France in the middle of the nineteenth century. For the highly limited franchise, and the prohibition on political associations, made it unnecessary for the parliamentary groups to seek support outside of the government.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the few European writers who mention political associations—like Constant, Tracy, Royer-Collard and Guizot in France—believed that they had a corrupting influence, that they undermined the order and unity, the public-spiritedness, of free, competent government.<sup>11</sup> Parties played upon the selfish passions, pitting

one group against another, at the expense of society as a whole. Party strife created social conflict; and carried to the extreme, it could lead successively to anarchy and tyranny. European writers, in short, thought poorly of parties and the party spirit. Against this background Tocqueville wrote.

On the other side of the Atlantic politics was different. Extragovernmental party organization had emerged in the late 1790s (with the Federalists and Republicans), only to disappear almost totally by 1816 (due to the Federalist rout in 1800), and then to reappear again in the late 1820s (with the intraparty struggle between Jackson and Adams).<sup>12</sup> Thus during the late 1820s and the early 1830s party organization was on the rise. Yet a national party system was still remote. The national party organization was no more than a loose joining of state groups. And the degree of development in state party organizations differed markedly from state to state and from region to region. Party organization was a gradual, unplanned undertaking, a succession of ad hoc responses to particular events, which would take at least another decade to mature. Yet while party organization and legitimate opposition were becoming part of the American political experience, old attitudes, negative feelings, towards parties still prevailed—participation in partisan politics proceeded intellectual support. Although there were stray remarks about the value of party competition in this period, the more conventional antiparty rhetoric still proved the rule. Those writers who ventured an opinion on party—among them James Monroe, Matthew Carey, John Q. Adams, John C. Calhoun, Theodore Sedgwick and even Andrew Jackson—followed the lead of their immediate predecessors—like George Washington, James Madison, and John Taylor—and denounced party formation. They accepted the possibility of party as part of the price that a nation had to pay for free government. Yet they were never pro-party; they were always aware that party strife could at any time destroy the nation. Hence they concentrated their efforts on trying to discourage party competition, so that party rivalry would not undermine democratic government.

Tocqueville agreed that parties were a dangerous, often destructive force on free government. Nonetheless he found some good in parties. He did not, to be sure, endorse the idea of party government; nor did he unequivocally advocate the unrestricted liberty of parties. He argued that under certain circumstances parties could be an important vehicle to check the even more dangerous perils to modern democracy. And, in so arguing, he presented us with one of the first intellectual defenses of the worth of party.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this study is to provide some analysis and explanation of the place of party in the *Democracy*. In order to accomplish this purpose, it will be instructive to look initially at Tocqueville's examination of the history of American parties, where he presented a conceptual framework scholars still use to identify the different forms

of party competition, and then to integrate that theme into the more theoretical statement of the political and social value of party in democratic modes of political life.

i

Before we turn to the discussion of American parties, it might be useful to clarify several points to help us thread our way. First, the fundamental idea underlying the discussion is this. There are two different kinds of parties: "great" parties and "small" parties. The adjectives "great" and "small" had nothing to do with the size or life span of the party. They were instead used in a moral sense, that is, to indicate whether the motive behind the party was the public good ("great" parties) or private gain ("small" parties). Second, the term "party" itself did not have the same meaning for Tocqueville that it has today. Political parties have come to mean permanent, institutionalized organizations competing to control the personnel and policies of government. For Tocqueville, terms like "party," "faction," "interest," "grouping" or "political opinion" were used more or less interchangeably. Thus party sometimes signified just the cleavages of opinion in society on matters of public concern. At other times—more frequently—the term suggested political organizations. Such organizations, however, were merely the most sophisticated form that parties could take. In the chronicle of American parties Tocqueville employed both meanings. But he never bothered to identify the shift, the specific time or events, when party moved from meaning a current of opinion to intra- and then to extragovernmental organizations. This leads to some dissatisfaction with the analysis. Third, Tocqueville perceived parties, in whatever form, as temporary alliances. Their structure and constituency changed from issue to issue, depending on time and circumstance. As temporary organizations, parties invited little concern with their structure and actual daily workings. What was of more interest was their character and instincts (174). We can now turn to Tocqueville's study of American parties.

European parties, as Tocqueville only too well knew from personal experience, were those "great" parties of revolutionary periods which often convulsed a state. They grew out of the belief that fundamental change in the constitution or very structure of society was necessary (174-75). They were dedicated to alternative claims of justice, to alternative moral standards about the foundations of society, as for example, the struggle in France between the *ancien regime*, symbolized by the aristocracy, with its customs, privileges and pride of place, and the democratically-inclined France, manifested in the opinions of the bourgeoisie. The issue of equality was the heart of the matter, and party (class) opposition raged around it. "Great" parties thus had a great deal at stake, an all-inclusive way of life which made success imperative. They were thoroughly dogmatic, with doctrines and policies

to govern their every action. Yet when compared to other kinds of parties, they exhibited a nobler character and more sincere beliefs in their every action. The reason is fairly clear. In them private interest, which always played a role in politics, was often covered over by a concern with the public good.

Tocqueville knew that such party opposition meant that the contending parties neither willingly recognized the right of the other parties nor left any room for compromise or conciliation. Their antagonism, fought over *immaterial* interests of the greatest importance, was resolved only after one of the parties overwhelmingly defeated the opposition. With the triumph of one party, a one party period, from the standpoint of principles, was ushered in; and a period began in which there were only minor political squabbles.

When Tocqueville tried to apply the European pattern of party to American politics, he found himself in difficulty. He confessed that what he least understood in America was "the nature and ways of the political parties."<sup>14</sup> He found that, like European parties, American parties were represented by distinct slogans, interests and issues. American parties, however, were in some sense different. They were not, Tocqueville observed, parties properly so-called. What distinguished them from their European counterpart was their nondogmatic nature. American society was not divided over great issues. There was no religious animosity, jealousy of rank or economic conflict. Rather society was "broken up ad infinitum about questions of detail" (177). America still had parties; but she had "small" parties struggling over the advantages of society.

The essential feature of "small" parties was their acceptance of the principles and existing institutions of the government. So far as instability was to be found in the country, it was to be found in the struggle over secondary matters. Thus while the principles of the "great" parties of former times were invoked, the appeal to principle was more a rallying device than a conviction. The true motive, to repeat, was *material* advantage. As far as the public interest,

no one thinks about it, and if one talks about it that is for form's sake. The parties put it [the label of a past great party] at the head of their deed of association just as their fathers did, to conform to an old usage. It has no more to do with the rest of the work than the royal permission which our fathers printed on the first page of their books.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, in Tocqueville's view, "small" parties were created by individuals, who desiring to gain office, knew that success was only possible through (temporary) party organization, and that party organization was only possible if there was some visible symbol, some principle, around which people could rally. The appeal to principle was necessary because it was "difficult to turn the man in power out simply for the reason that one would like to take his place" (177). Yet when once in office, the new official managed things almost in the

same way as his predecessor had done. After all, both agreed on the ultimate principles that governed society.

Tocqueville found the pettiness and materialistic orientation of “small” parties disturbing; he displayed his distaste in the *Democracy* by referring to them as factions or parties “without political faith” (175). In the notebooks on his journey to America, he more candidly addressed himself to the character of American parties.

I cannot conceive of a sorrier spectacle in the world than that of the different coteries (they don't deserve the name of parties) which to-day divide the Union. You see operating in broad daylight in their bosoms all the small and shameful passions which are usually hidden with care at the bottom of the human heart.

It is pitiful to see what a deluge of coarse insults, what petty slander and what gross calumnies, fill the newspapers that serve as organs for the parties, and with what shameful disregard of social decencies they daily drag before the tribunal of public opinion, the honor of family and the secrets of the domestic hearth.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, however, even the picayunes and personal vindictiveness of American parties did not dissuade Tocqueville from advancing the idea of the utility of party in democratic times. For parties need not display such banal effects. Admittedly, his appreciation was always somewhat tainted by the purity of motive and intense commitment to high ideals of “great” parties. Yet he also realized that where democracy had triumphed, where society was classless or at least well on its way to such a condition, the basis of “great” parties would be destroyed. Therefore a democratic nation would not be liable to those terrible shocks which, in former times, rocked society to its depths. Parties would now be more moderate in their effects. While moderate or “small” parties would annoy and inconvenience society, they were in another sense productive of incalculable advantage. For in a government of freedom they provided the minority with an effective tool by which they could oppose the tyranny of majority rule. But, as we shall show below, Tocqueville's opinion of “small” parties did not stop here. Abstracting from his knowledge of American parties, he accompanied this point with another argument. Parties formed in free men the habit of joint action that provided both a means to overcome the atomization of democratic society and a practical technique to be followed in the formation of the large manufacturing and trading companies so necessary for the prosperity (i. e. happiness) of a modern nation.

## ii

As Tocqueville pieced it together, American parties had not always been “small” parties. An era of “great” parties (meaning division of opinion) had begun when adoption of the Constitution was under

consideration. At that time the nation divided into two opposing camps, each of which claimed that their doctrines embodied the proper conditions of a freely functioning, democratic society. Tocqueville believed that the conflict between these two parties never reached the degree of violence that was evident in similar conflicts elsewhere. What raised them above the appeal to violence was the democratic and relatively new state of things. "In America the two parties agreed on the most essential points. Neither of the two had, to succeed, to destroy an ancient order or to overthrow the whole of a social structure" (175). "Great" parties in America, unlike those in Europe, were thus not confronted with considerable social and political obstacles. Nonetheless, they were still "great" parties; they struggled over *immaterial* interests of the highest order, the fundamental principles of the regime, equality and liberty.

Both parties in America were attached to democratic government. Therefore the struggle grew out of the dispute over the meaning and ways in which the founding principles were to shape the form of government and type of society to be produced. Tocqueville's view of this struggle was never fully developed, but certain implications can be drawn from his general remarks. He argued that when the federal Constitution was proposed as the answer to the ills suffered under the Articles of Confederation, the principles of equality and liberty were brought face to face. One party (of opinion), which some years later came together in a political organization under the name of Federalists, had a mature and thoughtful taste for liberty. They realized that the perils threatening the people would only spring from the abuses of liberty, from making "the actual government, and not just the source of powers, lie with the people" (153). Since they recognized that democracy necessarily operated by majority rule, they focused on the majority principle and its potential conflict with liberty. Consequently, without abandoning the principle of majority rule, they advocated a system which would moderate the power of the majority, and the legislative branch which represented it, so that free and competent government would result.

Since the Federalists initially predominated, they were able to apply their ideas particularly to the Constitution. They subordinated the various states where the popular will was reflected in administration, in jurisdiction and in legislation (indeed in legislation) to a strong central government; and they granted the three branches of the central government extensive governing power. Moreover, they guaranteed the traditionally weaker partners in the division of power, the executive and judicial branches, but especially the executive branch, which was distrusted and jealously circumscribed in the states, the strength and independence to restrain the popular will as expressed through the legislative branch. The Federalists held that this design of government, along with other constitutional devices, such as legislative checks and balances, would act as a brake on tyrannically-minded majorities.

That Tocqueville sympathized with the attempt to check popular power in the name of liberty is well-known. It is not necessary to repeat here the complete argument. The main point will suffice. Commenting on the superiority of the federal Constitution over those of the states, Tocqueville asserted,

Two main dangers threaten the existence of democracies:

Complete subjection of the legislative power to the will of the electoral body.

Concentration of all the other powers of government in the hands of the legislative power.

The lawgivers of the states favored the growth of these dangers. The lawgivers of the Union did what they could to render them less formidable. (155)

During Washington's first term in office, Tocqueville learned, the interest which opposed a strong central government prior to the adoption of the Constitution again surfaced. At its head this time was Thomas Jefferson, "the greatest democrat ever to spring from American democracy" (203). By Washington's second term, party labels (and organizations) had been adopted by the opposing interests rallying around Jefferson and his acknowledged opponent, Alexander Hamilton, the spokesman for the Washington Administration. At this moment great (extragovernmental) parties were officially born in the United States.

The party of Jefferson, the Republicans who, from Tocqueville's point of view, really wished to extend the power of the people, "claimed to be the exclusive lover of liberty" (176). They appealed directly to the people and reminded them of the mixed character of the Union and of the time when a strong central government did not dictate the laws. Playing upon the people's sentiment for the return to state and local control of almost all matters, the Republicans argued that an aristocratic bias lay at the bottom of the Federalists' organization of the central government. They charged that the central government, with its position on the issues of funding, assumption, taxation and foreign affairs, was leading the nation backward towards monarchical and hereditary rule. Yet the Republicans did not propose the overthrow of the government, or even alteration of the text of the Constitution. Instead they advocated a central power which adhered strictly to the letter of the law. Such adherence, they believed, would reestablish a central government which hardly governed at all. All authority over all objects of concern (except foreign affairs) would be returned to local control. Here there would clearly be fewer barriers to stand in the way of the popular will. (The above discussion of the Federalist-Republican controversy has been culled from pages 118, 120-21, 151-63, 176, 252, 386-87).

Although the Federalist position was backed by almost all the great men the War of Independence had produced, Tocqueville



claimed that their ideas always represented those of a minority of the population. For the people preferred equality to liberty and supported its extension over the Federalists' preference for liberty. Thus the Federalists' success was due to artificial means, to the virtue or talent of the party's leaders or to the people's fear of anarchy because of their experience under the initial confederation (176). Yet he thought that the Federalists' influence was "one of the luckiest circumstances attending the birth of the great American Union" (176). Their principles, their unrelenting attempt to check legislative dominance, an issue, as we have noted, so worrisome to Tocqueville himself, could not but produce an intellectual tie between him and the Federalists.

Tocqueville recognized, however, that since the distinct characteristic of America was equality, it was only a matter of time before the Federalists lost control of the government. With the election of Jefferson as President in 1800, they were "engulfed by a sudden flood," and from that day on the Republicans took "possession of the whole of society" (176). But the Federalist reign, Tocqueville stressed again and again, "at least gave the new republic time to settle down and afterwards to face without ill consequences the rapid development of the very doctrines they had opposed" (176-77). The Federalists, to a great extent, provided America with the kind of leadership that was needed at the inception of all democratic nations. They realized, as Tocqueville pleaded with French leaders to realize, the necessity "to substitute understanding of statescraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its [democracy's] true interests for blind instinct" (12).

Tocqueville, like most contemporary writers on parties, saw the issue dividing the Federalists and Republicans as serious. The election of 1800 thus was a critical election because it forced one of the contending parties of principle completely out of the political arena. Although parties would later sprout up, Tocqueville recognized, like the more recent writers, that they would be of a different nature than the "great" parties of yesteryear. For Tocqueville, however, these ("small") parties would not be permanent organizations incorporating the major groups of society into broad coalitions competing to win elections. They would instead come into being for specific purposes, as much to influence public opinion and governmental decisions (functions we today attribute to interest groups) as to win elections (12). They would therefore be temporary alliances and carry within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. On the other hand, Richard Hofstadter (and a few other current writers), who fails to make the distinction between "great" and "small" parties, doesn't see the election of 1800 as a battle over principles. The election was important because it gave rise to legitimate partisan opposition (a party system). Consequently, Hofstadter argues that the Federalists were not overwhelmed by complete defeat. Rather they quietly acquiesced and displayed a "resigned acceptance of their new oppositional status."<sup>17</sup> When he doesn't find such an interpretation in the *Democracy* he con-

cludes that its portrayal of party is unrewarding. In so doing, as we shall shortly see, he overlooks what is original and important in Tocqueville's analysis.

iii

"Parties," Tocqueville stated, were "an evil inherent in free government" (174). They were "inherent" because

The most natural right of man, after that of acting on his own, is that of combining his efforts with those of his fellows and acting together. Therefore the right of association appears to me by nature almost as inalienable as individual liberty. (193)

Thus in Tocqueville's view, when a government recognized the natural right of association, men would actively exercise that right, and parties would be formed.

Tocqueville did not stop here, though. There were, he speculated, different degrees—from currents of opinion to extra-governmental organizations—to which the right of association could be exercised in the political world. He enumerated these different levels of sophistication and their political importance. And he arrived at a theory of association by which he judged the extent to which a nation could tolerate party activity. The first degree of association was of "a purely intellectual tie" (190). It consisted in the public endorsement a number of individuals gave to particular beliefs and in their pledge to promote the spread of those beliefs. This state of political activity, in Tocqueville's opinion, nearly coincided with freedom of the press; but it had more force than freedom of the press for two fairly obvious reasons: it formulated the familiar opinions more succinctly, and the zeal of the supporters grew stronger as they became acquainted with each other. When compared with the more advanced stages of the use of association in politics, this degree was the least disruptive of society.

The second degree incorporated the freedom to assemble. At this stage "centers of action" which represented a "fraction of the party" were established at various points throughout the country. These "small assemblies" provided a visible symbol around which local partisans could gather, thus extending the influence and increasing the activity of the association. This degree, parties formed primarily around local interests and personalities, paralleled the one Madison envisioned as the principle solution to the problem of majority faction in *Federalist* 10. Tocqueville also envisioned this degree of political organization as most salutary most often in a democratic society. The exception, Tocqueville thought, was when majority tyranny threatened.

The first two degrees of association affected politics in a marginal (least destructive) way. The last degree, which incorporated the other

two degrees, introduced the use of association directly into the political sphere. Here local partisans selected delegates to represent them at a central convention. Armed with the power to attack existing laws and propose new ones, conventions encouraged direct, mass opposition to the government and its policies. At this instance, according to Tocqueville, the party resembled a government within a government, or a nation within a nation (174, 177, 251).

Tocqueville's misgivings about parties centered on this last and most developed degree of association. The reason for his apprehension is clearly seen in his observations in the *Democracy* and several conversations recorded in the notebooks surrounding the controversial free trade issue. The following remark by former President John Q. Adams is especially noteworthy:

The practice of having conventions is only 5 or 6 years old. Now we have them for all sorts of things. But to tell you frankly what I think, I find these assemblies dangerous. They usurp the place of political bodies and could end completely thwarting their action.<sup>18</sup>

Tocqueville, like Adams, or perhaps from Adams and *The Federalist*, saw size as an important reason why parties didn't tear the Union apart. "The Americans," he wrote early in the *Democracy*,

are used to all sorts of elections. Experience has taught them what degree of agitation can be permitted and where they should stop. The vast extent of territory over which the inhabitants spread makes collisions between the various parties less probable and less dangerous there than elsewhere. (134-35)

In convening conventions, however, the various parties united to support a common cause; and the larger this coalition of parties, the more pressure it could place on laws and lawmakers. Thus for Tocqueville, as for Adams and Madison, conventions negated the intent of representative government. At this stage of association, associates, as it were, became partisans usurping the function and authority of elected constitutional bodies.

A week or so after his conversation with Adams, Tocqueville debated the virtue of conventions with John Ingersoll, lawyer and former member of the legislature. Ingersoll argued that the purpose of conventions was to persuade and not to act. They were strictly devices by which the minority could broadly popularize its position with the hope of winning over the majority. Tocqueville responded as follows:

Don't you perceive that in the character of almost all men there is only a step, the easiest step in the world to take, between proving that a thing is good and executing it? Besides, are there not certain political questions where the majority is so uncertain that each party may pretend itself the majority?

Thus you let be created, at the side of the directing power, a power whose moral authority is as great, which yet, though feeling itself strong enough to struggle against the established order, will respect it because of the metaphysical consideration that the convention is made to enlighten opinion and not to constrain, to persuade and not to act.<sup>19</sup>

This address, which underscored Tocqueville's fear of conventions as a potential weapon by which like-minded people formed into a mass power to inhibit legislative action, appeared almost verbatim in the *Democracy* (191). We must observe, however, that Tocqueville's view of the use of conventions in the United States was moderated by his conversations with Ingersoll and others who thought along the same lines. In the *Democracy*, therefore, he promoted conventions as an important device in the United States, albeit always a very dangerous one, to obviate an even more formidable danger—again, the tyranny of the majority. They allowed a minority to gather all the force within its power to express its position on a particular issue. Tocqueville was never uncognizant of the fact that conventions (national parties) were beneficial only within a particular political and social framework. As he said in one place, “A nation may set limits there [on freedom of association for political purposes] without ceasing to be its own master; indeed, in order to remain its own master, it is sometimes necessary to do so” (191).

Yet he found in the United States certain countermeasures which mitigated and averted the dangers of these (national) parties. One was that America, unlike Europe, was not divided over matters of principles; the other was universal suffrage. The former was effective because, as we have observed, mere differences of hue made it possible for the minority to bring the majority over to its position. The right of political association, therefore, was most dangerous when a party, because of differences of principle, could never hope to acquire the majority's support. But, according to Tocqueville, universal suffrage was the most important moderating force of parties in the United States. It provided a means by which the numerical strength of each party could be counted, thus never leaving the majority opinion, or party, in question. This morally bound minority parties to seek success through peaceful and lawful means. In Europe, on the other hand, universal suffrage was not yet a political reality. Consequently, almost every party professed to represent the will of the people. This state of affairs led to a different perception of the role of party, a perception which, for Tocqueville, cast a shadow on the utility of complete political freedom in European nations. For Europeans, parties were still seen as weapons by which those not in control of government could seize its control and implement their programs—in the name of the people, of course. This European perception of party went a long way in explaining Tocqueville's reservations on the use of conventions as a political device.

According to Tocqueville, the greatest threat to modern democracy was despotism. He found in the United States certain institutional mechanisms which helped to counter this threat. Among these were the separation of powers, legislative checks and balances, an independent judiciary and local self-government. Institutional mechanisms, however, could not of themselves provide the necessary guarantee against despotism. Therefore he also encouraged the cultivation of noninstitutional mechanisms, such as the establishment of a free press and voluntary associations for a variety of social and political purposes. Of the two, freedom of association was more important; of the two types of association, those for political purposes were more important. In order to understand the role political associations, or parties, were to play in a democracy, we must first inquire into Tocqueville's understanding of the basic tendencies of democracy.

Tocqueville emphasized that the most intense passion of democracy was equality. By this he meant "the right to pursue the same pleasures, to enter into the same professions, to meet each other in the same places, i.e. to live in the same manner and to pursue riches by the same means."<sup>20</sup> Tocqueville summed up the impact of equality on the customs, opinions and laws of democracy in the term "individualism." The term itself was of recent origin, "coined to express a new idea" (506). As he defined it, individualism was "a calm and considered feeling which disposed each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends" (506). Since its basis was rational, it was different than selfishness, the exaggerated love of the self that originated in blind instinct. Selfishness was coevil with man himself; individualism was of democratic origin, and it threatened to spread in the same ratio as equality. There were, moreover, two important features to be noted about individualism, the tendency of men to rely upon their own reason as the basis for all opinions, and to regard their own interest as the sole object of their concern. The compound effect of these two features was the privatization or atomization of society.

The first feature of individualism—faith in one's own effort and judgment—was the root of society as merely an agglomeration of independent individuals. An aristocratic society, on the other hand, was a totally self-enclosed community. In the normal course of things, the populace was tightly bound in—intellectually and politically—by social class and profession, by a keen feeling of identity of family lineage, and by the strong hierarchical nature of the whole of society. With this pattern of dependence and subordination, it was natural that the authority of a few individuals was accepted in matters of opinion and belief. Their judgments, which set the boundaries to thought, became the ultimate moral and intellectual standards of society. With the coming of democracy, all this changed. Men no longer were a part

of a wider collective entity held together by distinctive shared ideas about almost everything. They rejected intellectual authority and judged everything by the efforts of their own understanding.

To evade the bondage of system, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well; to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; *to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things*, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things (429). [emphasis added]

The chief tendency of this attack on all ancient things was the belief that nothing in the world was unexplainable, and that the explanation was easily accessible to all men (429-31).

The second feature of individualism—the self-interestedness of individuals—was the consequence of a societal revolution paralleling the one which undermined the acceptance of intellectual authority. For destroyed were the social and political institutions, e.g., the legal codes and social and economic barriers, that governed the relations between the three classes in aristocratic nations; destroyed also was the feeling of attachment and responsibility that made aristocratic society, in the traditional sense of the word, a community. “Aristocracy,” Tocqueville wrote, “links everyone, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link” (508). In democratic society, therefore, men were no longer naturally bound together. Individually weak and isolated from his fellows, no man owed anyone anything or expected cooperation from anyone in his enterprises. It thus happened that every man centered his attention upon himself alone and left society to fend for itself.

Since each man was the equal of the other, each moved upward or downward within the system based upon his own success or failure in making his own way. This gave a particular turn to the passions in the direction of commerce and industry (551). But, unlike in aristocratic society where the desire for prosperity was restrained by barriers of rank, education and fortune, in democratic society where no such barriers existed, the desire for prosperity was allowed to assert itself to the fullest. “Ambition becomes a universal feeling” (629). A concern for prosperity thus crept into every corner of the human heart; as such, men preoccupied themselves with improving their lot, caring for even the most trivial needs of the body and the slightest conveniences of life (530, 690). “Men living in democratic ages have many passions, but most of those culminate in the love of wealth or derive from it” (614). Driven by the desire for personal gain, each individual was concerned with serving himself alone. Individualism led democratic nations to lay themselves open to the establishment of a tyrannical government. So much so were men consumed by their personal well-being that they

either forgot about or had not time for the affairs of the state. The only political passion they had was the love of peace, which was the prerequisite for prosperity. They therefore left the care of public matters to the central government. The government, in turn, was both anxious and powerful enough to fulfill this role. As time passed, its power grew and grew; eventually, by treating all citizens equal before the law, it involved itself in every detail of social life and nearly every facet of personal everyday existence. To Tocqueville, an unrestrained, all-engulfing governmental authority which provided for the comfort and prosperity of its citizens was nothing but benevolent despotism, of which the tyranny of the majority was the form it was most likely to take in a democracy.<sup>21</sup>

Tocqueville believed that the manner of the despotism which threatened modern democracy was different from anything that ever before existed in the world. Modern tyranny was more humane and tolerant than its ancient counterpart. It degraded men rather than tortured them. It constrained the human will within narrower bounds. In the language of Tocqueville, democratic despotism stripped men of the “faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves” (694). The reason lay in the nature of modern despotism itself, which he also called “orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery” and “administrative despotism”:

It does not break men’s will, but softens, bends and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with government as its shepherd (692).

Not just government’s ability to coerce action, for ancient despotism had that capacity, but also government’s ability, plus desire, to relieve each citizen of the will to govern, to care for, his own destiny was the peril of modern despotism. By robbing men of that element which made them human beings, the impulse to accept responsibility of decision, the new despotism degraded men. This was what was new. Moreover, the social consequences of modern despotism were equally perilous. It robbed man of several of his sublimest faculties: the ability to cultivate the arts, sciences, poetry and literature; the desire to pursue great enterprises; the attachment to interests beyond himself; and the obligation to his fellow man. In the final analysis, despotism in its modern form reduced man to an existence below the level of humanity itself.

## V

The tendency of democracy to move towards atomism, despotism and mediocrity grated on Tocqueville’s sensibility. Yet he gave us

more than a keen appraisal of the weakness of democracy; he also gave us a durable list of remedies. And, as we have said, parties or political associations rank high on that list. The question which we must now take up is, in what way did parties war against the evils of democratic society?

*Atomism.* Parties (and voluntary associations in general) played a major role in combating atomism. Tocqueville attributed two inter-related functions to them. First, they contributed to moral development. Moral development, so he argued, required that a man look beyond his private interests and have some vision of the public good; and he held that participation in local political organizations was indispensable to this process. Playing upon the passion for material well-being, parties united under one banner men naturally kept apart by differences of age, intelligence and wealth. This pattern of relationship made men aware of each other and their community. "Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another" (515). Because it supplied such a variety of opinions, the informal discussion of local parties added fresh vigor to men's exertions. Seymour Drescher has noted well Tocqueville's belief that atomism could be overcome, as far as it could be overcome, by participation in small-scale organizations.

Projecting his own experience, Tocqueville could envision local government and small-scale association as the medium in which the artificiality of impersonal activity could be mitigated, in which one could perceive actors in terms of whole personalities rather than impersonal agents, and above all, where the individuality of one's own sense of identity could be heightened. The results of interaction in small groups reinforced the sense of controlling the whole social frame of reference, . . . The result of interaction in large or highly formalized groups seemed on the contrary, a continuous reinforcement of a sense of impersonality—one's own as well as others.<sup>22</sup>

As the opinions of men became more and more identified with those of the party, each member had a desire and a motivation for understanding and taking part in public affairs. Parties, therefore, may be said to have consequences of an educational nature. They played a critical role in maintaining an informed citizenry. By participating in party activity, an individual would better learn to safeguard his interests and also even discover ones of which he was previously unaware. Thus Tocqueville held widespread participation in parties desirable, not just as an effective and stable way of managing public business (i.e. elections), but also as a condition for the improvement of each and every individual. For the knowledge, the insight and the awareness of the mechanics of government exposed each member to whatever was occurring in the greater society. Consequently, what



Tocqueville said about local political institutions was equally applicable to parties: initially it was out of self-interest that men paid attention to the public good; afterward they did so by choice (512).

Second, Tocqueville did not consider majority tyranny to be just a political problem. He pondered another, more subtle type of tyranny, that of public opinion over the hearts and minds of men. Here was the great threat of majority rule. For the majority demanded unanimity on all occasions. But unanimity was not desirable. It rendered society absolutely stationary; it “confined the activity of private judgment within limits too narrow for the dignity and happiness of mankind” (436). Originality was stunted, diversity disappeared, no man thought for himself, or, if he did, he feared to express what he thought. It was false hope that democratic government would in and of itself nurture the various opinions and values, the interchange of ideas, so necessary to the greatness and continuity of free society. Among a democratic people, especially, associations, particularly parties, had to replace those few enlightened and learned individuals who had been the fount “of refreshing the circulation of feelings and ideas” in an aristocracy (431). Parties introduced the conflict of opinion. The result of the clash of opinion with opinion sharpened men’s mental faculties, extended their sphere of knowledge, and raised the general level of understanding above its former level.

*Despotism.* One of the unique features of aristocratic society was the fact that the sovereign power, the prince, did not govern and oversee every aspect of the affairs of the state. This responsibility was shared with the nobility. Each noble enjoyed some governmental powers within his particular sphere and on his own behalf. This tightly bound an individual noble to the populace of his jurisdiction, and vice versa. In such a society men had no need to join together for action because they were already firmly joined together. Each noble was “in practice the head of a *permanent* and *enforced* association composed of all those whom he makes help cooperate in the execution of his designs” (514). [emphasis added] These intermediate associations between a prince and his people provided “insuperable obstacles to the tyranny of the prince” (260). How was this so? In the management of his domain, the nobleman had come into daily contact with the people of the province, and they had come to defer to him and to support him. Thus the prince was very cautious not to encroach upon the nobleman’s privileges for fear that the nobleman would call upon his “permanent and enforced association” to forcibly defend his rights.

The problem in democratic times was to replace the moribund aristocratic associations, to restore a social balance, through a multiplicity of powers, that would prevent the possible abuses of authority. Tocqueville advocated the formation of temporary and artificial political associations to replace the permanent and natural ones of former times. Political actors, whether they were individuals or groups of individuals, would combine because of particular, noxious legislation

supported by the ruling majority. What would result would be combinations forming and reforming spontaneously at the national level according to the changing problems of life and the threat to personal freedom brought about thereby. Those who joined forces on one question would likely part company on another. Thus parties were a danger to balance a more formidable danger.

The omnipotence of the majority seems to me such a danger to the American republic that the dangerous expedient used to curb it is actually something good.

Here I would repeat something which I have put in other words when speaking of municipal freedom: no countries need associations more—to prevent either despotism of parties or the arbitrary rule of a prince—than those with a democratic social state. In aristocratic nations secondary bodies form *natural* associations which hold abuses of power in check. In countries where such associations do not exist, if private people did not *artificially* and *temporarily* create something like them, I see no other dike to hold back tyranny of whatever sort (192). [emphasis added]

It is apparent from this passage that unless men learned to combine with their fellows in parties, they would be less able to defend their freedom against an irresponsible democratic majority. We can now see more clearly the reason Tocqueville recommended the use of conventions as a political device. He was so fearful of despotism in democratic nations that any mechanism that would help to check it was acceptable. Parties at any level of sophistication, therefore, far from being vehicles for tyrannizing over minorities, as was often supposed, were for Tocqueville the only insurance of the rights of minorities. Moreover, the minority, by the sheer power that belonged to opinions, were enabled to exert an indirect, but very substantial, influence upon the course of public affairs. In the progress of the struggle which took place between parties, it sometimes happened that the opinions of a minority had triumphed over those of the majority, so as eventually to become the settled and ruling opinions, and to transfer the minority into the majority.

Thus the most important claim made on behalf of parties is that they were a bulwark of liberty. They were a way in which to lay a check on rulers and insured that their capacity for evil was reduced.

*Mediocrity.* Besides political associations, Tocqueville preached the necessity of the growth of many other kinds of groupings to balance the increase in equality. He acknowledged, for example, the overriding importance of moral and intellectual associations. He also acknowledged the importance of commercial and industrial associations. In an argument paralleling the one we have just reviewed on the necessity of political associations to mitigate the tyranny of the majority, we now find Tocqueville claiming that civil (commercial) associa-

tions were needed to enhance well-being, and, even more importantly, civilization itself in democratic times. He stated:

Among laws controlling human societies there is one more precise and clearer, it seems to me, than all the others. If men are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as equality of conditions spreads (517).

Tocqueville saw in civil (commercial) associations a device to replace the nobility of aristocratic times who had the power and wealth to accomplish commercial feats single-handedly. In other words, the prosperity—through industrialization—and the collective initiative which stimulated intellectual and social activity depended from the very outset on the development of organizations which acted as economic catalysts. Therefore it is only fitting that Tocqueville called the “technique of association . . . the mother of every other technique” (522). And again, he said, the “knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others” (517).

Now there was a natural link between political and civil associations, the adoption of the one gave rise to the adoption of the other. In moral, economic and intellectual matters, men could easily assume that they did not need to cooperate with others; but in politics this was not the case. If men were to have any knowledge of public life, they had to come together with others. This practice of association was likely to be adopted from the political arena, in which it was necessary, to those other arenas, in which it was not thought to be so. For when individuals saw the collective strength they could acquire even in the most important undertakings, they would soon begin to associate for smaller matters. “In politics men combine for great ends, and the advantages gained in important matters give them a practical lesson in the value of helping one another even in lesser affairs” (521). In a democracy, moreover, men would be more likely to join a political than an economic organization because they would not be jeopardizing their own personal wealth. Once in the political party, they would learn the art of association, the art of collaboration and compromise in working with others. Thus understood, parties were “great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association” (522). Therefore parties indirectly advanced the prosperity and greatness of democratic society.

Even if political parties did not contribute directly to the growth of civil associations, any prohibition by law on the one would impair the other. Yet most democratic governments restricted the freedom of parties, for parties were the only organization that could effectively check governmental activity. At the same time, democratic governments encouraged the proliferation of economic associations. They believed these organizations would turn men’s minds away from public

affairs to those interests which required political stability, reinforcing their own positions. But, Tocqueville argued, governments could not restrict parties and expect civil associations to flourish. In prohibiting some associations, the question of whether or not an association was legal would spread throughout the country. A general concern would form among those who cooperated for social action for their personal (and financial) security. As a result, the desire to form economic associations would be constrained.

Tocqueville's teaching on parties had two dimensions. The first, which provided the conceptual framework on which the discussion of parties rested, outlined the distinction between "great" and "small" parties. "Great" parties emerged from the antagonism between the age of aristocracy and the age of democracy. This battle over the transformation in social conditions of society was resolved only after one of the parties completely overwhelmed the opposition and had their way throughout society. What arose, then, was "small" (temporary) parties which struggled over the advantages of society, over the right of office and specific programs.

The second dimension of Tocqueville's teaching was based on the assumption that the age of democracy had triumphed. The social condition thus transformed generated a different kind of choice for mankind: democracy with liberty or democracy with servitude. Within this wholly modern context, Tocqueville argued that ("small") parties would play a positive role in overcoming the threats of despotism and securing the benefits of liberty. Parties would combat the perils of despotism *directly* by encouraging political participation (hence checking majority tyranny), *indirectly* by providing the foundation for nonpolitical associations (hence encouraging prosperity and greatness) and, finally, *directly* by counteracting individualism and its effects (hence making man aware of the importance of society and of his fellow man).

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## notes

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1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner; George L. Lawrence, trans. (New York, 1966), 676. All subsequent references to the *Democracy* are noted parenthetically in the text.

2. For a discussion of some of the supposed omissions in the *Democracy* see George W. Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York, 1938), 755-67; Philip Bradley, "Historical Essay," Introduction to his edition of *Democracy in America* (2 Vol.; New York, 1958), ix-lxiii.

3. M. I. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, trans. F. Clarke (2 Vol; New York, 1902), II, 54-9; Austin Ranney and Willmoore Kendall, *Democracy and the American Party System* (New York, 1956), 101-03; William Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, eds., *The American Party System*, (New York and London,

1967), 91, 97; Everett Ladd Jr., *American Political Parties* (New York, 1970), 79-93; Frank Sorauf, *Party Politics in America*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1976), 23-4; Robert H. Blank, *Political Parties* (New Jersey, 1980), 60-1.

4. Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of A Party System* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 256-57.

5. Pierson, 186.

6. Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, 1962), 134.

7. Hofstadter, 257.

8. As the reader of the notebooks on Tocqueville's journey to America follows his travels, he is struck by the unanimity of opinion about the nature of American parties. Everywhere he visited he heard the same story: America did not have parties in the European sense. But however much agreement of opinion there was on the character of American parties, there was just as much lack of evaluation of their structure and operations. Tocqueville was not once exposed to the facts of party life in America, or to the devices employed to sustain it. The blame, however, fell more with Tocqueville than with the men he interviewed. The information he received was limited to the extent of his curiosity. And because he never asked about the organizational features of parties, perhaps out of lack of curiosity, perhaps out of lack of previous exposure, he never received a description of them. See, for example, the interviews recorded in Pierson, 49, 70, 116, 399, 462, 657-58.

9. We agree with Sorauf's definition of party, which is composed of three elements: (1) "the organization proper"—the local committees, the state central committees and the national committee, and the people who staff and run these; (2) "the party in office"—the legislative parties, with their caucuses, floor leaders, whips, and patronage system; (3) "the party-in-the-electorate"—the individual who identifies with the party and for whom the party name offers clues and guidelines in interpreting political events and in making electoral decisions. These elements are not separate; rather they are intertwined and together constitute party and a party system. Sorauf, 9-11.

10. Leon Epstein, *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (New York, 1967), 24-6; Sigmund Neumann, ed., *Modern Political Parties*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1965), 12-13, 107-111, 173, 355-56.

11. Guido de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (London, 1927), 158-76.

12. The history of American party development can be roughly divided into four stages. The first stage marks the origin of parties and extends from the late 1790s to 1816. The second stage runs from the late 1820s to 1856. During this period, especially from the early 1830s on, American parties as we know them today acquired their essential form of structure and activity. The third stage stretches from 1860 to 1932; the fourth began with the election of 1932 and continues on through today. These two stages are essentially derivative from the previous ones. The changes that have taken place in structure and activity have minor, principally adjustments to social and political conditions in society and not to basic alteration in the concept of party itself. The literature on the various stages of party development is so extensive as to prohibit any listing here. A good starting place, however, is the collection of essays edited by Chamber and Burnham cited in note 3 above.

13. This is not to say others, especially Americans, did not publicly, in writing, endorse parties. They did (e.g., Francis Lieber, Martin Van Buren, William Marcy). But Tocqueville was, with the possible exception of Burke before him, the first writer to speak at length—to defend on theoretical grounds—parties as a positive force in democratic society.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America* trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York, 1971), 80.

15. Pierson, 657.

16. Pierson, 657.

17. Hofstadter, 130. For a critical review of Hofstadter's thesis see Kenneth Kelsen, "Political Parties and Democracy," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 40, 2 (April, 1978), 163-82. Cf. also Ronald Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840." *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 68 (June, 1974), 473-87.

18. Pierson, 418.

19. Pierson, 481.

20. Quoted by Lively, 50.

21. Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford, California, 1967), 71.

22. Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh, 1968), 47.